

The Collective Memory of the Maronite Community in the 21st Century: an Anthropological Perspective¹

Abstract

This paper deals with the question of the collective memory of the Maronite community in the 21st century as reflected by the secular representatives of the community, based on a fieldwork trip to Lebanon in December 2022. The article is divided into two parts: firstly, the main aspects of the collective memory in the field of identity studies are assessed; secondly, the modern Maronite collective memory represented by the political and cultural representatives of the Maronite community is analysed. The paper provides conclusions about the golden age of Lebanon, the perception of the Phoenician legacy and the connections between Lebanon and the Maronites.

Keywords: Maronites, Lebanon, modern identity, collective memory, Phoenicianism.

Introduction

The question of the modern Maronite² collective memory in the 21st century is part of broader discussions that are tied into modern-day Lebanese issues, as most processes in the country cannot be fully understood without reference to intra-communal relations and Lebanese confessionalism³. Each community in the process of collective self-identification provides its own vision of collective memory and each is bound to Lebanon to some extent, yet one has to note that today in Lebanon there are still two levels of memory: a weak collective-

¹ The data for this article was collected during the author's fieldwork trip to Lebanon in December 2022. The author wants to express his sincere gratitude to Dr. Ralph Zarazir, for his help in organising all the meetings and interviews during his stay in Lebanon, and also to all his interviewees.

² In 2023, the Maronites made up around 20-27% or (1 million) of the total population in Lebanon. Since the last census was conducted in 1932, the current estimates vary according to different sources, hence it is impossible to provide an exact number and one can only rely on the approximate calculations.

³ Lebanese confessionalism was established with the declaration of state independence in 1943, distributing power among the local confessions with the aim of creating unity within the state of Lebanon and creating a communal-based political life where each religious community would become a distinct entity with its political representation.

national memory that is supposedly shared across religious backgrounds, and a strong communal memory represented in the form of a narrow sectarian memory, exclusively between members of a religious community (Aboultaif, Tabar, 2019, pp. 97–98).

Analysing the collective memory of the Maronite community is important in an understanding of the idea of modern Lebanon. The community was a key supporter of the new state, advocating Lebanese independence in 1919 when its patriarch Elias Hoayek (1843–1931) went to the Versailles Conference to seek to convince the international community to establish Greater Lebanon⁴ as a separate entity from Syria. Collective memory played a key role in his argumentation of Lebanese distinctiveness (Firro, 2004, pp. 15–16). After Lebanese independence was declared, most modern Lebanese symbols were also introduced by the Maronite community and throughout the 20th century Maronites continued to support and develop the idea of Lebanese distinctiveness based on several pillars, one of which was collective memory, tightly connecting modern Maronite and Lebanese paradigms.

As for Maronite collective memory in the 21st century, three elements should be assessed. Firstly, understanding the concept of the golden age, which is likely to be integrated into the national mythology, as perceived by the members of community. This is crucially important in explaining the source of nostalgia. Secondly, instrumentalisation of the Phoenician legacy, or Phoenicianism, is an important aspect of the Maronite community, having played a significant role in the 20th century – when past motives played a pivotal role in supporting the narrative of Lebanese distinctiveness by linking the modern Lebanese with the ancient inhabitants of a once prominent civilisation. The most important thinkers here were Said Akl (1912–2014), Michel Chiha (1891–1954), and Charles Corm (1894–1963).⁵ Finally, perceptions of the origins of the Maronite community and its relations with Lebanon – with an emphasis on how the Lebanese landscape is romanticised by the members of the Maronite community.

The issues in post-Taif Lebanon⁶ have attracted much attention from scholars, mainly focusing on such topics as international relations, political, economical and social issues and diaspora-related questions. However, the topic

⁴ Expanding the territory of Mount Lebanon to the territory of Greater Lebanon.

⁵ Additionally, it is important to observe that Phoenicianism remained a Maronite (or Christian) phenomenon, mainly developed as a Lebanese nation-building paradigm in opposition to pan-Arab and Syrian nationalism (Mazzucotelli, 2022, p. 55).

⁶ The post-Taif era refers to a period in Lebanese history after the Taif Agreement was signed in 1989 politically ending the Lebanese Civil War and changing the political and social environment in the country and revising the constitution.

of Maronite identity (including the collective Maronite memory), particularly in the 21st century, has barely attracted greater attention in academia. Both Franck Salameh (2010; 2020) and Asher Kaufman (2001; 2004) should be mentioned for their multiple works analysing the Maronite community's historical development and Maronite thought, although mainly focusing on the events of the 20th century. The monography prepared by Michal Moch (2013) about the Maronite and Coptic identity should be mentioned as well, while Moch (2012) also prepared a work about the memories and identities of Lebanese Maronites in the light of political conjuncture. Apart from that, the work of Maurus Reinkowski (1997), providing an assessment of national Lebanese identity in post-war Lebanon, should be mentioned, although the work is also based on processes in the 20th century.

There are several other publications dealing with the meta-sectarian questions in Lebanon. Lucia Volk (2010) prepared a work on the meta-sectarian identity of Lebanon in the light of collective memory. Melani Cammet (2014) and Lars Erslev Andersen (2022) addressed the question of sectarianism in Lebanon, while Maximilian Felsch (2018) introduced the term *Christian Nationalism* and provided an assessment of religious nationalism in Lebanon mainly focusing on the political aspect of the question. Also, Eduardo Wassim Aboultaif and Paul Tabar (2019) assessed the relations between national and communal memory in Lebanon, while Ersun N. Kurtulus (2009) analysed the impact of the Cedar Revolution on Lebanese collective self-identification.⁷

The aim of this paper is to assess some aspects of the Maronite collective memory consisting of perceptions towards the Lebanese golden age, the

⁷ Indeed, there are many more works on the Maronite community prepared by various scholars focusing on different areas related to the Maronite community. For example, Jobe Abbass Jobe prepared a work titled "A Codec Particularis for the Maronite Church" (2007), Malek Abisaab continued the topic about the Maronite Church by preparing a work "Warmed or Burnt by Fire? The Lebanese Maronite Church Navigates French Colonial Policies 1935" (2014), while Sami E. Baroudi and Paul Tabar focused on a more political dimension by publishing the work titled "Spiritual Authority versus Secular Authority: Relations between the Maronite Church and the State in Postwar Lebanon: 1990-2005" (2009) with Paul Tabar alone analysing the Maronite Church's relations with the diaspora in the work entitled "The Maronite Church in Lebanon: From Nationbuilding to a Diasporan/Transnational Institution" (2006). Additionally, Alexander D.M. Henley's several articles, such as "Religious Nationalism in the Official Culture of Multi-Confessional Lebanon" (2017), "Between Sect and State in Lebanon: Religious Leaders at the Interface" (2016), and "Politics of a Church at War: Maronite Catholicism in the Lebanese Civil War" (2008). Two additional works should be mentioned by Emma Loosley entitled "A Spiritual Odyssey: the Maronite Self-Image in the Twenty-First Century" (2005) and Hussein Sirriyeh entitled "Triumph or compromise: The decline of political Maronitism in Lebanon after the civil war" (1998) focusing on the questions of Maronite collective identity. Yet all these works exceed the scope of this paper, which aims at contributing to the field of the Maronite collective memory reflected in how lay representatives of the Maronite community remember.

factual historical references to Lebanese history and the Lebanese landscape as reflected by lay representatives of the Maronite community involved in cultural and political life, based on the author's fieldwork in Lebanon in December 2022. The paper is divided into two parts. Firstly, the author explains the essential aspects of the collective memory in contemporary collective identity construction based on the insights, mainly, of Anthony D. Smith and Duncan Bell and, secondly, he evaluates the findings from his fieldwork trip to Lebanon based on the thematic blocks of the golden age, factual historical references (based on perceptions towards Phoenicianism and additional factual information) and the Lebanese landscape.

The Methodology of the Research

The work is based on the data collected during the author's fieldwork trip to Lebanon in December 2022, where he conducted 19 semi-structured interviews. Among the interviewees were political and cultural representatives of the Maronite community whose occupations include teaching staff of universities and schools, lawyers, doctors, political activists, politicians, entrepreneurs, ex-military personnel – all these individuals can be defined as active and visible members of the community, willing to speak and share their ideas and having means at their disposal to influence the masses. The reason for choosing the elite or intelligentsia for the interviews is based on the assumption defined by Miroslav Hroch (2012) that the elite is largely responsible for developing and spreading modern collective identity to the masses and although the latter is crucially important in collective identity construction, it is the intelligentsia that turns certain ideas into a coherent concept and spreads them within the community and society through various instruments. The questionnaire was prepared based on the historical development of Maronite thought applied to a theoretical framework drawn from the collective memory field. Interviewing research participants provided an opportunity to directly speak with people active within the Maronite community in Lebanon and learn their perceptions towards various important questions, with such perceptions in turn likely to be spread more widely within the community.

In line with the ethical standards of the research⁸, the participants were first briefed on the purpose of the research and given the researcher's self-

⁸ The empirical field research was carried out according to the document 'Guidelines for the assessment of compliance with research ethics' on academic ethics and procedures approved by the Ombudsmen of the Republic of Lithuania. Guidelines for the assessment of compliance with research ethics. Retrieved from: <https://etikostarnyba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/V-60-Del-Atitikties-moksliniu-tyrimu-etikai-vertinimo-gairiu-tvirtinimo-su-pakeitimais> [Accessed: 15 July 2023]

introduction, also gaining permission for using audio recording. Considering the importance of protecting the privacy and safety of the research participants, several aspects should be marked. It has to be stated that the author clearly understands that Lebanon has been through very difficult times, with political uncertainty and deep financial crisis taking place simultaneously; apart from that, the Maronite community is relatively small in numbers and most of the active members are easily recognisable based on descriptions of their professions, age or gender even without providing names; moreover, several research participants agreed to participate in the research only when anonymity was granted. Consequently, none of criterion which could allow identification of the interviewees and their ideas is provided in the work. Each interviewee was provided a random number with the research participants being identified by the formula *Interview No X*.

In the interviews, the author followed an order of some thematic blocks, one of which was collective memory. He usually started with a question about the golden age, followed by the worst age of Lebanese history and the role of the Maronites in these periods. Later he proceeded with a question about Lebanese ancestors, in most cases switching to the topic of the Phoenician legacy and its impact to modern day Lebanon. Afterwards, he moved to a question about the origin of the Maronite community and finished this thematic block with a question about the main historical differences between Lebanon and other entities in the region and Maronite relations with Lebanon. Also, in most of the interviews, relations between Lebanon and Maronites in general were discussed.

The interviews were conducted in English, heavily supplemented with French and Arabic words. All the interviews lasted approximately one hour. Most of the interviews were conducted in Beirut. In the text the author prefers quoting the interviewees instead of paraphrasing them, letting them speak for themselves with his sole intervention being the application of punctuation.

1. Collective Memory and Identity Construction

The collective memory, as one of the key elements in identity construction of each community aspiring to claim its vision of collective identity, as a topic has been developed by many scholars since the famous lecture of Ernest Renan titled *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* given in 1882 at Sorbonne University. There is no a single community without any reference to its history – in each case there will always be some references to the past highlighting certain points of it. The concept of the *collective memory* was developed by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who argued that it is impossible to separate individual

memories from the society at large because collective memory is always mediated through complex mechanisms of conscious manipulation by elites and unconscious absorption by members of society (Verovšek, 2016, pp. 3–4). For a better understanding both these mechanisms and the ways the collective memory acquires its role in identity construction, several aspects should be considered.

Firstly, the collective memory is one of the pillars of the modern collective identity serving a universal function for communities to bind its members. As Smith argued, “memory, almost by definition is integral to cultural identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities” (Smith, 1999, p. 10). The shared (or collective) memory is different from history in a way that there are many existing collective memories and only one history. In history, communities are not considered to be unique with the historical facts and context making everything comparable and equally important while the collective memory focuses on distancing and emphasising the uniqueness of the self (Assmann, 2011, pp. 24–30). These relations can be summarised with the quote of Anthony D. Smith:

Ethno-history,⁹ we may recall, differs from history in that the latter is concerned with a more or less disinterested and professional enquiry into the past, whereas the former stands for the members’ own records and memories of a community and its own rediscovery of an ‘authentic’ communal past or pasts. In the latter endeavour, the communal past appears as a series of original moral lessons and imaginative tableaux, which vividly illustrate the identity and uniqueness, and the centrality and essential goodness of the community – whatever the shortcomings of its individual members (Smith, 2010, p. 151).

The memory is always accompanied by the national myth aiming at explaining the genesis of a certain community or a nation, also connecting the past and present and preparing the future projections. The definition of the national myth was provided by Bell who wrote that:

We should understand a national myth as a story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation’s past and its place in the world, its historical eschatology: a story that elucidates its contemporary meaning through (re)constructing its past. [...] they [myths] subsume all of the various events, personalities, traditions, artefacts and social practices that (self) define the nation and its relation to the past, present and future. Myths are constructed, they are shaped, whether by deliberate manipulation and intentional action, or perhaps

⁹ Anthony D. Smith considered the collective memory to be a part of ethno-history.

through the particular resonance of works of literature and art (Bell, 2003, p. 75).

However, memory is much more complex than myth, because memory can function in opposition to myth by representing a conceptually distinct category, while the most referred to memories may not be the ones that are privileged in mythology (Bell, 2003, pp. 76–77). Therefore it is more appropriate to refer to memory instead of a narrower concept of myth, the most important aspect of which is the concept of a golden age, providing a sense of nostalgia and which has to be necessarily separated from today (Smith, 1986, pp. 174–176).

Secondly, the collective memory always has its factual roots in history, because, as Smith observed, some primordial assumptions, such as the vitality of a pre-modern identity, stimulates a greater possibility to form the modern nation. For Smith, nationalism actually creates nations where they are not present, but for this certain signs, serving as the basis for reference, are needed (Smith, 1999, p. 71). However, some aspects of the constructivist approach should be considered as equally important contributing factors explaining how certain ideas are accumulated, then instrumentalised and, finally, spread to the masses. In this process, the cultural and political representatives of the community, consisting of, according to Hroch, intellectuals, governors, representatives of free professions (such as doctors, advocates, lawyers, artisans), priests, teachers, noblemen, townsmen and intelligentsia, are responsible for the construction of identity (Hroch, 2012, pp. 87–99). To sum up, political and cultural representatives can stimulate and develop cultural identity of the masses by instrumentalising various domains (for example, collective memory) of the modern collective identity, but identity cannot be formed out of nowhere; it needs certain cultural qualities that can be used by a nation or community as an axis for its cultural symbols (Smith, 1986, pp. 212–214).

Finally, the memory always has a spatial dimension which is called *ethnoscape* (Smith, 1999, pp. 150–154) or *lieu de mémoire* in French (or *place of memory* in English) as proposed by Pierre Nora. Jan Assman also emphasised, the key is references to time and place for a community and its collective memory, because the inhabited space or landscape starts to be perceived as home by the community with various artefacts providing an image of stability, supplemented by the symbolism (Assmann, 2011, pp. 24–30). Bell contributed that, “the spatial dimension tends to be rooted in particular constructions of an often-idealised bounded territory, for example a romanticized national landscape” (Bell, 2003, p. 76) while Smith provides a more detailed definition about the landscape and its role in the memory:

How does this association between the group and the terrain come about? More particularly, how do ethnoscapings emerge? At its simplest, the terrain in question is felt over time to provide the unique and indispensable setting for the events that shaped the community. The wanderings, battles and exploits in which 'our people' and their leaders participated took place in a particular landscape, and the features of that landscape are part of those experiences and the collective memories to which they give rise. Often the landscape is given a more active, positive role; no longer merely a natural setting, it is felt to influence events and contribute to the experiences and memories that moulded the community. This is especially true of ethnoscapings, where the landscape is invested with ethnic kin significance, and becomes an intrinsic element in the community's myth of origins and shared memories (Smith, 1999, p. 150).

The collective memory is an essential factor contributing to identity construction, with a golden age, some factual information and landscape aspects interacting when analysing the collective memory of a community as the key domain of modern collective identity construction and in the following pages the author provides an analysis of the Maronite community and its representatives regarding collective memory. Additionally, before moving on to analysis of the Maronite collective memory, it must also be noted that it is not only direct references to the three above mentioned aspects that can be observed in the domain of collective memory, but also the distinction between *self* and *other*; in practise meaning that collective identities, as well as collective memories, are partially relational and composed of comparisons and references to other entities (Wang, 2017, p. 18). Consequently, when analysing the interviewees, not only the directly described cultural features, but also distancing from other entities should be considered as contributing factors.

2. The Maronite Collective Memory

2.1. The Golden Age

With the first question in the historical block of the interviews about the golden age of Lebanese history, the author aimed at understanding which period of Lebanese history is considered to be the source of nostalgia for the Maronites he talked to. The aim of analysing this aspect is based on the fact that the perception of the golden age, as a part of the national mythology, provides an explanation about the formation of the community, its place in the world and the source of nostalgia binding the members of the community. Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that the predominant majority of interviewees

(16 out of 19)¹⁰ consider the golden age of Lebanese history to be (at least, partly) the years from the declaration of independence (1943) to the outbreak of the Civil war (1975) with small date variations. In each case the economic prosperity of Lebanon at the time was emphasised by the interviewees as the main contributing factor to a golden age. For example, one of the most detailed answers to the question reveals that the economic prosperity of Lebanon between 1943 and 1975 as the main contributing factor to the perception of the golden age of Lebanon:

The economic golden age after World War II when Lebanon was nicknamed the *Switzerland of the Middle East*.¹¹ So, at that time [the United States] dollar was equivalent to two Lebanese Lira. We were more powerful than the French franc and the Deutsche Mark. The golden age from an economic point of view came after our independence from France, which was in 1943, but the last soldier left Lebanese soil in 1946. Between 1946 and 1970 we lived in rising prosperity (*Interview No 14*).

However, it was not only the economic state of Lebanon at the time, as indicated in the above passage, that was the main contributing factor in the perception of Lebanese prosperity, with social and cultural factors also playing an important role in establishing the image of the golden age, as is reflected in another passage:

The golden age of Lebanon was in the 1960s. It was flourishing, it was the *Switzerland of the Middle East*. I think it was jam – everything was open, you had the biggest universities, the biggest actors, it was a place for vacation, it was the jam of the Middle East (*Interview No 1*).

¹⁰ Two interviewees expressed their doubts about the worst or best periods in general. One of them elaborated the continuum of evolution which leads to improving things (*Interview No 6*), while the other added that “I don’t think there is a golden age and the worst age. Every ten years we are encountering similar things at different level. [...] Every 20 years we have crisis between religions starting with the 1950s, so nothing is changing, so the golden age in Lebanon maybe it was in 1950s as there was lots of money, we were the *Swiss of the Middle East* but still politically it was not stable even at that time” (*Interview No 19*).

One interviewee elaborated on a period beyond the 20th century by highlighting the rule of Fakhr al-Din in the 17th century as the golden age of Lebanese history, claiming that “we had to wait until the Ottomans arrived in 1516 and got rid of Mamelukes to come back there to live, out of these caves and villages and valleys, to rebuild these villages. And at the same time, you had this new system of the Ottomans who had allowed people to rule themselves, and Fakhr al-Din saw that Maronites with their new college were becoming extremely prosperous and so there was this marriage between military force of Druze Fakhr al-Din and intellectual force of the Maronites, and this is how this Modern Lebanon would start here.” (*Interview No 15*).

¹¹ The motive of the *Switzerland of the Middle East* oftenly appeared in the interviews.

In addition to economic and social factors, expressed by most of the research participants, two interviewees, although highlighting the period of 1943–1975 as the golden age of Lebanese history, also elaborated the establishment of Greater Lebanon in 1920 as a more important aspect for the Maronite community. One of these two interviewees indicated that “from a political point of view, it was after World War I when we had the identity of Great Lebanon. Compared to previous circumscriptions, it was our Great Lebanon“ (*Interview No 14*), while the other perceived the establishment of Greater Lebanon to be a reward following the previous years of famine¹² by saying that:

For Maronites, the best [period] was immediately after WWI. Why? Because at the time the war had killed 30% of the Maronites and they wanted to give them a reward – not a reward, something back. This area was attacked a lot. I know why because I was responsible for the Church here. 60% of the village died here from the famine. So after that they wanted to give a prize. To pay the price. They asked the patriarch to do the negotiations for Lebanon for a big [Greater] Lebanon. And everybody was thinking that Maronites must decide on that. That was era when Maronite were in charge of Lebanon (*Interview No 7*).

What is more, it is also worth noting that one more interviewee claimed the golden age of Lebanese history to be the times of *mutašarrifiyya*¹³ (and not the period 1943–1975) and the reason for such claim is mainly related to the political neutrality¹⁴ of Lebanon at the time:

The best thing that they [Maronites] have done is apply neutrality, they came to the resolution that they are going to distinguish themselves from what is happening around them and they are not going to fight Arabs, Turks or the Western world. And this is why we hear that this was a golden age of Lebanon. And this example just proves a point that properly enforcing rules and laws and keeping neutrality can solve all the problems in the region and people can live happily (*Interview No 8*).

Just as the perception of the interviewees about the golden age of Lebanese history was almost univocally expressed to be the years between 1943–1975 with small date fluctuations, the perception of the worst age of Lebanese history

¹² The Great Famine of Mount Lebanon of 1915–1918 resulting in decline of Lebanese population by half (Hakim, 2013, p. 223–224).

¹³ A period of Mount Lebanon Governorate 1861–1918.

¹⁴ The concept of political neutrality at the time as defined by the interviewee should be assessed in the light of the tense political atmosphere of the 1950–1960s and the Lebanese civil war afterwards.

was almost univocally¹⁵ (16 out of 19) dated to be at some point between the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 and recent times. It is also necessary to note that most of the research participants, when asked about the worst age, provided longer and more developed answers compared to those elaborating perceptions of a golden age, mainly, the author assumes, due to the fact that the perception of the worst period overlap with their lifetimes. The author believes that the following quote not only reflects the general perception of the interviewees about the worst age of Lebanese history, but also explains how the once lived golden age turned into the worst age, separating those days from current times, and how this is also connected to personal experience:

Unfortunately, I did not live in the golden age, I was too young. When the war started, I was a little boy, I was 4-5 years old. So the golden age I hear about from my parents, let us say, or what I read from the history of Lebanon. I really missed it personally as an experience. But of course I lived in the worst part of Lebanon. Since forty years now living wars, troubles, crisis, occupation, whatever you want. So no, I did not live in that period. What I lived through is really not the best part of it (*Interview No 3*).

One must note that – as indicated in the passage above – in many other interviews both war atrocities and social, political and economic issues that hit Lebanon afterwards (oftenly mutually interconnected) – were highlighted as the main contributing factors in perceptions of the worst era, with different details provided by the interviewees. One of these interviewees, apart from the war years, emphasised the last 15–17 years are the worst period of Lebanese history, also comparing these two periods, with plenty of details provided:

The worst period of Lebanon, besides the war, which was hell, I think the last 15–17 years. These are the worst. If you want to narrow it down, it is the last few years. But it started 17 years ago when [was] Rafiq [Hariri] assassinated. The worst era of Lebanon – it is this one. The one I have been awake during. Even when our parents tell us, for example, that the war of the 1975 was very bad, but what they used to say is there was money. You used to know that even if you are being hit in this area or that by bombing, you would know where to hide. There was money. There was fun. It was joyous even if they were at war. Now it is depressing. Most people will emigrate from the country 70 years, maybe for 50 years, after the war. And we are going backwards

¹⁵ In addition to the two interviewees not believing either in golden or in worst ages, one interviewee contributed to the discussion by saying that the worst period of Lebanese history was the era of Mameluke rule (1282–1516) (*Interview No 15*).

everyday. Inflation, the poverty rate, the unemployment rate, all of that, so I think this decade is the worst in Lebanon (*Interview No 1*).

Another interviewee, asked about the worst period of Lebanese history, highlighted social factors, referring to the post-Taif era by emphasising political aspects connected to the Maronite community's position in Lebanese political affairs:

I would say post-1990, after the Taif Agreement. My personal view is that Maronites lost the war during that period – some people will tell you that the war was the worst time but, in my opinion, the results were very bad too. After the Taif Agreement, the political role of Christians diminished, they had less influence, and there were particular actors who increased their role after this event. I would say that one the worst periods was between 1990 and 2005, especially for Christians, taking into account all internal aspects of the Syrian occupation, which was imposing for people. I am not saying that it is much better now but I think that is when the problems started – the Christians lost the war and all of these problems happened (*Interview No 10*).¹⁶

As can be deduced from the passages above, the worst period of Lebanese history, as perceived by research participants, was at some point between 1975 and now, with different aspects depending on the interviewee, with only one interviewee directly linking the worst era of Lebanese history to the current times, saying, “if you wanna add the worst, it is 2020-21 after the explosion¹⁷ and the lira's collapse versus the [United States] dollar. It is complimentary” (*Interview No 17*).

To sum up the author's findings on perceptions of the golden age and the worst age of Lebanese history, it can be clearly stated that the interviewees almost univocally claimed the Lebanese golden age to be the years between the declaration of Lebanese independence in 1943 and the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, with the worst period either the civil war itself or the years following the end of the civil war in 1990.

¹⁶ Another interviewee shared a similar opinion, claiming the worst age of Lebanese history to have lasted “from 1990 to 2005 because we were occupied by the Syrian regime, and this is the worst part,” also noting that the political representation of the Maronites in Lebanon became weaker after 1990: “before 1990, being Maronite and being Lebanese was equal. But after the Taif Agreement, no, the Maronites lost the power because the president doesn't have power anymore” (*Interview No 11*).

¹⁷ The interviewee referred to the explosion in the Port of Beirut on 4 August 2020.

2.2. The Phoenicianism and other findings

The second aspect the author wanted to analyse regarding the Maronite collective memory was the interviewees' perception towards the Phoenician legacy and Lebanese history in general. The aim is to analyse this aspect aware of the fact that collective memory in every segment has to have factual roots in history. Phoenicianism appears in the research for a reason, namely that it was actively developed in the 20th century by the Maronite community, and consequently, analysis of the collective memory of Maronites in the 21st century must be complemented by the insights into the Phoenician legacy today.

Phoenicianism has never been a monolithic concept and has never been supported by the entire Maronite community and, as elaborated by many intellectuals in the 20th century, acquired various forms. The study revealed that among those individuals from the Maronite community the author interviewed, the perception of Phoenicianism provides a much more diverse variety of answers compared to those when asked about the golden age, at the same time reflecting the variety of ideas in the 20th century.

Only three research participants directly supported the idea of Phoenicianism as the core concept of both the Maronite and Lebanese identity, sharing similar views to those of the Phoenicianists of the 20th century, saying either "in reality we are Canaan, Phoenician, Lebanese. We are not Arabic people" (*Interview No 2*), or "they were some kind of traders and they created the first alphabet so yes, we are proud to be Phoenicians" (*Interview No 17*), or "being Phoenician is more important than being Maronite" (*Interview No 12*).

At the same time several interviewees consider the Phoenician legacy as a matter of historical textbooks without any further connections to current times,¹⁸ telling the author either "basically, after these many centuries and decades have passed I do not think we are directly related to the Phoenicians" (*Interview No 3*) or "to tell you the truth, we do not care. We do not care if you were a Phoenician" (*Interview No 8*). The other interviewee provided a more detailed answer sharing the same principle:

I am not sure if we go and dig in the past to find and reveal if we are Phoenicians or we are Canaan descendants of Saint John Maroun. I do not think this will change a lot. Our mission has really changed and we are at the much more advanced and complex stage of defining targets

¹⁸ One interviewee told the author not willing to bind Maronites to any specific historical entity at all: "It is a very problematic topic, I believe that we are part of this area, we didn't come from somewhere, we are not Phoenicians, Arabs, we want to be related to this area – I am somebody who is tied to this area, I am not somebody who came from abroad to live here" (*Interview No 10*.)

and objectives and I think this discussion is useless for the moment (*Interview No 6*).

Yet, as it can be seen from another interview, although Phoenician motives are matter of ancient history without any connections to the modern-day Lebanese, occasionally these motives are used by Lebanese people in their daily conversations, as it can be seen from the example below:

This is [Phoenician] really an old history, *ya'ni*¹⁹, it is not like we live it as an identity. As Maronites, it is much more recent history and more recent identity that we have, so it is different. I do not think the Phoenicians determined our history – it is not something really present unless it is genetic and we have the genes, let us say Lebanese are they know how to do these, they are good at commerce, you know, these kind of things. They are good salesmen, it is just said for fun. It is a very very old history, *ya'ni*. I do not think that we can claim that today it is part of our actual identity (*Interview No 1*).

However, based on the data the author collected on the fieldwork trip, it can be stated that most of the interviewees, although neglecting the direct influence of the Phoenicians to the Lebanese inhabitants today, expressed some level of connection to the Phoenician legacy, mainly based on the historical geographical presence and some features inherited from the ancient Phoenicians visible today, for example: “since we are coming after the Phoenicians, if you want, our ancestors, so we were also open to the sea. We were sailors and adventurous in our DNA” (*Interview No 5*). A more detailed opinion, neglecting the direct Phoenician influence, yet, at the same time, accepting its partial legacy to modern-day Lebanese was provided by another interviewee, who noted that:

You can find a lot of theories. Some say that Maronites are Phoenicians, others say that no, Phoenicians left this land during some wars during the Arab conquest. So I am not sure if we are the Phoenicians. Maybe we are not the Phoenicians but what we know is that we are retaining from the Phoenicians an eagerness to be open, to be open for the west, to be open to strangers, and to collaborate with other civilisations. We keep this in our mind. Maybe it is our sun, maybe its our sea that dictate this, not genetics only. And we have from Saint Maroun this capacity to struggle and not to give up before getting what we believe in. And finally, we have some needs in this region that we feel that we can close a gap that exists in the needs and that’s a whole fusion of all of

¹⁹ A very popular Arabic verbal form used in daily language, meaning “so”, “that is”, “namely”.

this genetics, history, needs and role model from Saint John Maroun (*Interview No 6*).

As can be observed from the example above, apart from the Phoenician element being commented by the interviewee, the research participant also emphasised the influence of Saint John Maroun in the formation of modern-day Maronite and Lebanese people, a motive that appeared several times and is commented on below.

Additionally, it is also crucially important to note that some interviewees, when discussing Phoenician motives and their use in modern Lebanese discourse, revealed that this question is affected by the political circumstances of the 20th century, which eventually led to the outbreak of the civil war:

It was at the time of the war between the Christians and the Muslims. Not to say that because West Europeans and Americans confuse Arabs and Muslims. Arab is not Muslim. [...] It was used only against Arabism. Not to be Arabic, you are Phoenician. But this is during the war between the Christians and the Muslims. Because, I told you, all the Western countries confuse Arabs and Muslims because being Arabic does not mean you have to be Muslim, like our ancestors who were Arabic but Christians (*Interview No 19*).

Another interviewee contributed to the topic by describing these discussions about the Phoenician legacy to be based on religious or social factors at the same time having no relevance today:

You will always have in Lebanon different versions and these different versions are always related to religious or social beliefs. And if you do your interviews, you will see that more Christians will try to identify themselves as descendants from the Phoenicians and more Muslims will see themselves as Arabs. This is the story that will never end in Lebanon: are we Phoenicians or are we Arabs because it is an identity thing. In my opinion, it does not make sense. I mean OK, Phoenicians were here and we are descendants from the Phoenicians but the later cultures and generations and people were coming to Lebanon over the thousands of years so that's not very contemporary (*Interview No 16*).

Indeed, the data collected during the interviews support the claim that Phoenicianism has always been a complex topic in Lebanon with different approaches expressed by Maronites with plenty of different aspects emphasised by interviewees. Based on this variety of answers, several further remarks should be made on the topic of Phoenicianism and historical perceptions by the Maronites because, when talking to the interviewees about the ancestors of

Lebanese people and the other history-related questions, the author observed three repeatedly highlighted aspects by the interviewees that he was not expecting before his trip to Lebanon and that should be elaborated as important to the self-perception of the Maronite community. Firstly, several interviewees emphasised the importance of both Saint Maroun and Saint John Maroun²⁰ claiming them to have been key people in the historical development of the community, especially in bringing Christianity to Lebanon. Such an example can be found in the following quote:

I think the Maronites were the main people who lived in Lebanon at the beginning. So you know when *Mar*²¹ Maroun came to Lebanon, he came from Syria and he spoke with the people here and they were not Christian at the time. He brought the good news from Christ and he baptised them. The main people living in Lebanon, the first religious people are the Maronites. The others came later (*Interview No 7*).

Secondly, the term Canaan²² appeared several times in the interviews, binding the modern Maronites and the ancient Canaan civilisation, therefore it can clearly be stated that the Canaanites also play a certain role in the self-identification of the Maronites. For example, one interviewee said that:

Ethnically, all Maronite people think that they are Canaanite. Canaan means Phoenicians. The others think they are Arabs. So there is some deviation between the Maronites and the others. They identify themselves as Canaanite (*Interview No 9*).

Thirdly, the motive of the mixture of both Lebanese society with its 18 communities and multilayered Lebanese history appeared in almost every interview as one of the main features of Lebanon and its history. For example, one interviewee used the metaphor of a mosaic:

Look, Lebanon is like a puzzle. It is mosaic. So you can find Phoenician roots in it, you can find some Arab, you can find some European from the Crusaders and you can find a little Armenian minority. So it is a mixture (*Interview No 9*).

²⁰ Saint Maroun (d. 410 AD) is considered to be the founder of the Maronite community, however, he himself had never reached Lebanon; Saint John Maroun (628-707) was the first Maronite Patriarch in Lebanon.

²¹ *Mar* is an Aramaic word (used in Syriac as well) to name the Saint, consequently, “Saint Maroun” is an English version of “Mar Maroun” in Syriac.

²² Canaan was a Semitic-speaking civilisation during the 2nd millennium BC on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Another interviewee also emphasised the mixture of Lebanese history, although considering it not to be the key aspect of Maronite identity, while at the same time claiming the Maronites to have originated from this region:

It is a mix of cultures, we come from many areas. Maronites are from this area and because this area is a mix of cultures, we have Phoenician roots, but I do not know why people put labels on their historical backgrounds. My point of view is that we are part of this area, part of these Arab countries – Christians for a long time refuse to say that they are Arabs, this is not because of a geopolitical aspect, but a political aspect, because saying that you are Arab equals Muslim, and they do not want to say that they are Arabs because they do not want to be absorbed (*Interview No 10*).

Finally, one interviewee, when asked about the ancestors of the Lebanese people, provided the following answer, which aptly summarises the essence of the Lebanese political system and, the author believes, no further comment is needed on this passage:

Every person is Lebanese who works correctly for this country and every confessional – maybe he is Muslim like as-Sulh²³, maybe he is Maronite like Camille Chamoun²⁴, maybe he is Shia like Kamal Asaad²⁵, maybe he is Shia like Sabri Hamadeh²⁶ – every person has done good work for Lebanon I can call them our ancestors (*Interview No 18*).

To sum up, it can be stated that the variety of different ideas expressed by the interviewees towards the Phoenician legacy and its role in Lebanon today combined with additional factors expressed by the interviewees cannot be reduced to a single definite outcome with plenty of different perceptions provided. The author finds that highlighting cultural and historical Lebanese diversity is a more apt concept defining Maronite perceptions towards Lebanese history.

2.3. Maronites and Lebanon

The third question the author wanted assess from the interviews in the thematic bloc of collective memory was the connections between Maronites and Lebanon (particularly, Mount Lebanon) and reflections on these connections by

²³ Riad Al Solh (1894–1951), Prime Minister of Lebanon 1943–1951.

²⁴ Camille Chamoun (1900–1987), President of Lebanon 1952–1958.

²⁵ Kamel Asaad (1932–2010), Legislative Speaker of Lebanon 1964, 1966, 1970–1984.

²⁶ Sabri Hamadeh (1902–1976), Legislative Speaker of Lebanon 1943–1946, 1947–1951, 1959–1964, 1964–1968, 1968–1970.

the Maronite people. The aim of analysing this aspect is based on the fact that the perception of the landscape provides an understanding on the connections between it and the community, complementing each other. When discussing this topic, every interviewee confirmed inseparable relations between Lebanon and Maronites, while elaborating different aspects of these connections. Firstly, they can be defined by the generally shared idea that the modern state of Lebanon was created by Maronites. For example, one interviewee told the author that: “in Lebanon, Maronites have a power to become president, they participate deeply in social and political life and they are the builders of Lebanon from the beginning” (*Interview No 9*), while another interviewee told the author that: “if you have to think of Lebanon, you have to think of the Maronites, because we are the reason that Lebanon is Lebanon” (*Interview No 2*). Similarly to these ideas, another interviewee contributed to the discussion in the following way:

You know, there is a common belief and it's very deep in our subconscious thinking, that Lebanon has been made to create a land or to find a land for this Maronite community to exist. So we have it in our deep belief and it is a reality anyway (*Interview No 6*).

While some interviewees, as indicated above, expressed more general considerations about the Maronite and Lebanese connections, another interviewee was more precise in referring to historical details by emphasising the Maronite efforts at the Versailles Conference in 1919 amid attempts to convince the international community about the establishment of a Lebanese state when discussing the Maronite role in the Lebanese affairs:

It is the creation of Lebanon, because as you know before World War I we did not have Lebanon as a country. We had Mount Lebanon, the city of Tripoli, city of Saida, the city of Beirut but pertaining to the Ottoman Empire. We did not have a country. The patriarch at the time went to Paris at the end of WWI and managed to convince the international community that Lebanon has its own identity despite it not having fixed borders. Maronites have been the leaders and founders of its known surface until now (*Interview No 14*).

One more interviewee, similarly to the previous research participant, elaborated historical details from the same period and the Maronite contributions to it by highlighting the extension of Lebanon from Mount Lebanon to the Greater Lebanon and the Maronites' role in this extension by claiming that while modern Lebanon was established by Maronites, Lebanon is for all:

You know that the Maronite is the reason Lebanon was founded, you know that. Lebanon was only Mount Lebanon. But when the opportunity was given to Hoayek, Lebanon was expanded. We think that Lebanon is for all. It is not for Maronites alone. But when Lebanon was Mount Lebanon, we were the majority, but after we have East and the West we are not the majority. To put our hat in good place and make us feel that we are and will be in Lebanon for all the years to come, they gave us the presidency of Lebanon (*Interview No 2*).

Similarly to the idea expressed above, another interviewee emphasised the coexistence between different religions in Lebanon to be a spirit of the idea of Lebanon. Overall, the idea of coexistence, as well as the idea of multilayered historical and cultural character of Lebanon, was expressed multiple times:

They [Maronites] are, let to say, the real spirit of the idea of Lebanon. This idea is coexistence between Muslims and Christians. And Christians were, *ya'ni*, mainly Maronite at that time, they were predominant in numbers but, honestly, I cannot see anymore a difference between Maronites and the other communities (*Interview No 3*).

Apart from the fact that Lebanon is for all, it is also important to observe that Maronites all over the world are united by a common ancestry in Lebanon and Lebanon has a particular meaning for all Maronite people across the world:

Lebanon was made and built and the idea of Lebanon was for Maronites. So you cannot find a Maronite elsewhere. His origin must be from Lebanon. Any Maronite in the world must have a Lebanese origin (*Interview No 7*).

In addition to this idea, it also has to be noted that, as one of the interviewees observed, Lebanon is a necessary condition for the Maronite community to exist anywhere in the world:

Of course, the Maronites played a huge role there as well – for example, if we look at their flag, the cedar, it became the flag of Lebanon. Historically, they used to be equal to Lebanon, even now we say that Maronites cannot exist without Lebanon, it is impossible. Maronites in Australia or in any other place would disappear if Lebanon disappears (*Interview No 15*).

Secondly, relations between the Maronites and Lebanon can be defined by the attachment of the Maronites to the land and mountains in Lebanon in particular, with these mountains as one of the main assumptions making Lebanon unique in the region. One more interviewee told me that geography

was the main factor in the historical formation of Lebanon, shaping its cultural character:

Geography played a role. It is obvious because we are a country that is open to the sea, we are totally different from countries that are totally deserted and two hundred kilometers away is the desert. So this geography plays a role. This is why Lebanon was more like an open country for different civilisations and different cultures and this is why Lebanese people who are more culturally diversified than the Arabs around us. This is why the Phoenicians were in Lebanon because of the country, because they would not live in a desert. So they can export. So Lebanon, by geography, is very important for its cultural identity (*Interview No 16*).

Another interviewee, similarly to the previously expressed idea, stressed geography and the mountains, claiming these elements to be essential factors for preserving the Maronite identity:

Without the geography there would be no Lebanon. It is the geography which was the natural fortress where the Maronites were able to come and hide and to preserve their identity. This is how they were able to preserve. [...] Every time when invaders were pushing to exterminate them, they would go up up up more and more to the upper mountain. Whenever they had an opportunity, they expanded again (*Interview No 5*).

In addition to the mountains, the author also observed that the land is also an essential factor shaping the Maronite identity and character:

I think the Maronites have a history of being under pressure. They were hardworking people, they were great at this *teraz*²⁷ and in Lebanese case this comes from the culture of the Maronites because they came not to comfortable places with beaches, they had to create their own place, grow crops, food, trees, and essential things to survive, and that is why they live in remote areas with mountains, snow, which naturally protected them. I think these are the main character ideas of the Maronite: being attached to the land but also having a background that they need to defend it – it comes from their history where they faced a lot of attacks and pressure, not just from Muslims, but also Christians, who were killing each other, based on the question on what do you believe and trying to figure out which way of believing was right (*Interview No 10*).

²⁷ The interviewee referred to a specific way of agriculture by using terraces in a mountainous area.

Life in the mountains created differences between Maronites and other Christians of Lebanon. Historically, the Maronite community was living mainly in the mountains while the other communities lived in the cities: “in the past, the Maronite used to live in the mountains, you know, the Orthodox used to live in the cities” (*Interview No 19*), additionally, another interviewee added that: “you cannot feel the Maronite identity in Beirut” (*Interview No 16*). Together with the Maronites, the Druze people were also living in the mountains: “Druze and Christians are completely mountaineers, Mediterraneans, they are local, they originate from this land” (*Interview No 15*). One more similar opinion, explaining the Maronite identity through the difference with the other, can be found below:

The Maronites are more related to mountains than cities. Historically, the Orthodox were in the cities, the Maronites were in the mountains. Historically, they are not the aristocrats. They are peasants. The poor people who lived in the mountain and were fighters (*Interview No 3*).

To sum up, it can clearly be stated that Maronites and Lebanon are bounded by an inseparable connections both historically and culturally and the aspect of landscape, which historically has formed the cultural character of Maronites, was emphasised univocally by every interviewee the author talked to as one of the key elements to the modern collective Maronite identity.

Conclusions

After analysis of the 19 interviews made during author’s fieldwork trip to Lebanon in December 2022 based on collective memory methodology, the author would like to provide the following quote provided by one of the interviewees that, he believes, reflects and summarises the general opinion expressed by most of the individuals he interviewed:

I think the idea of Lebanon links to the Maronites. More than the Phoenician. The Lebanon that you find now in this model was created by Maronites, they came from Syria and lived in this mountain nature to defend themselves from any other army that tried to occupy this country. I think the Maronite community has the right to honour them for creating this country (*Interview No 18*).

The above quote reflects the general view of the Maronites expressed in the interviews and noted by the author. Indeed, there were additional aspects provided by the interviewees covering various topics of Lebanese history and their role in the Maronite collective memory today along the three theoretical domains discussed in this article: the perceptions towards the golden age,

relations with factual history and with the landscape. The main findings along each of these segments shall be discussed more in detail:

Firstly, it should be noted that the majority of the interviewees described the golden age of Lebanon to be the period of 1943–1975 with small date variations. This period marks both social and economic prosperity of Lebanon, labelling Lebanon the *Switzerland of the Middle East*. The golden age ended with the outbreak of civil war in 1975, starting the worst period of Lebanese history, which, according to some of the interviewees, continues up to the present;

Secondly, it should be noted that the perceptions of factual history, another important topic, provided a great variety of opinions. The first topic the author wanted to analyse due to its importance in the 20th century, Phoenician motives, in the context of the 21st century in Lebanon is still a complex topic, reflecting different approaches of the individuals of the community. For some, it is an essential element of Lebanese history; for others, it is a matter for historical textbooks; for most of interviewees it is an important, yet one of many aspects of Lebanese history. On top of that, the study suggests that three additional elements – Saint Maroun and Saint John Maroun (as the pioneers of Christianity to Lebanon), references to Canaan (as the ancestors of Lebanese) and the mosaic of Lebanese history and society (both elaborating the multilayered history of Lebanon and currently officially 18 communities residing in Lebanon) – are considered to be essential factors in shaping the modern-day Lebanese identity;

Thirdly, the research reveals that every interviewee expressed an opinion that Maronites are the ones responsible for the establishment of modern-day Lebanon and both Maronites and Lebanon are inseparable from each other. Moreover, there is a specific connection between Maronites and mountains in Lebanon, spiritualising these relations.

To conclude, it is important to state that claiming this study's findings to represent the full voice of the whole Maronite community would be too ambitious a task. The study reflects an opinion of an influential part of the Maronite community and its secular representatives, capable of influencing the masses within the community. Because of this influence and means at their disposal of the Maronites the author interviewed, the ideas shared with him in the interviews are likely to reach the masses and influence them, yet it is up to each individual to choose self-identification. However, the author believes that his study assists in revealing the collective Maronite identity in the 21st century for, at least, two reasons. On the one hand, the collective memory is one of the pillars in modern collective identity construction. On the other hand, this

study contributes to the understanding of the current processes in Lebanon in the light of Lebanese reconciliation. The latter is a complex process with the 18 officially recognised communities acting within Lebanese confessionalism, though, considering the historical Maronite role in the formation of modern collective Lebanese identity and the lack of works in the field, the very likely collective lay Maronite voice in the 21st century is a necessary component to be discussed.

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